NORTHERN IDAHO GROUND SQUIRREL DIET STUDY INTERIM REPORT OF THE 2008 PILOT FIELD EFFORT

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BACKGROUND

The northern Idaho ground squirrel (*Spermophilus brunneus*; NIDGS) Technical Working Group has, for a number of years, recognized the need for a comprehensive study of NIDGS diet. This fundamental aspect of NIDGS ecology is critical to understanding population decline, assessing the extent of competition with livestock, and identifying important forage plants for habitat restoration projects. One previous study comparing diets of NIDGS and Columbian ground squirrels (*S. columbianus*) was incomplete, sampling from 2 sites (Huckleberry and Cold Springs) during a 1-week period in 1 year (Dyni and Yensen 1996). A second study on the nutritional content of forage plants had a different emphasis, examining the nutritional values of plants potentially important to NIDGS and comparing nutritional values among sites with different management histories (Yensen 2004). That study originally focused on 15 plant species and sampled from 4 occupied sites the first year, then refocused to fewer plants and 1-2 sites (Summit Gulch and Tree Farm) the following 2 years. While these studies generated important information, they were not representative of the diversity of occupied sites or the full spectrum of plants available from emergence through hibernation. A comprehensive research study of what NIDGS eat throughout the active season remains a recovery priority.

In 2007, with funding from the Payette National Forest, the Technical Working Group tasked Dr. Eric Yensen with developing 2 study proposals, 1 of which focused on diet and potential overlap with livestock. The resulting study design called for sampling at 5 occupied NIDGS sites, 5 times per year per site for 2-3 years (Yensen 2008). The Idaho Department of Fish and Game implemented a pilot year of sampling at Tree Farm and Summit Gulch during the 2008 field season.

METHODS

Plant Specimens —Plants eaten by NIDGS are identified through laboratory analysis of fecal pellets. The Laboratory compares cell structure and features of plants eaten by squirrels to plant reference slides. Our objective was to record every plant species present and collect 2 specimens of each at Tree Farm and Summit Gulch for reference slides and for herbarium voucher specimens. We divided the Tree Farm site into 9 sections to systematically cover the site. Plants were recorded by section and specimens were pressed and later catalogued. At Summit Gulch we recorded presence of all plants encountered but collected only specimens not detected at Tree Farm. We continued recording and collecting new plants as they were encountered through 21 July.

We modified the study design to incorporate a 'plant availability' component. The objective was to sample vegetation composition and cover along 100-m transects during the same periods that fecal pellets were collected. The general locations of transects were established a priori on aerial photos

to ensure adequate distribution across the site, but the specific starting points and directions were random. We placed a 20 x 50 cm Daubenmire frame ('quadrat') every 10 m along each 100-m transect (each time randomly selecting which side of the transect line the frame was placed) and recorded an ocular estimate of ground cover for classes (e.g., bare ground, grasses, forbs, shrubs) and an estimate of canopy cover for each species observed. Species composition, total cover, and frequency of encounter were summarized from these data (Bureau of Land Management 1999).

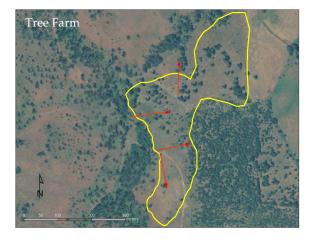
Fecal Pellets —Fecal sampling was designed to occur in conjunction with IDFG's ongoing population monitoring. Specifically, squirrels live-trapped as part of long-term mark-recapture efforts (Evans Mack 2004) were held a little longer before release to obtain a fecal sample. Samples were placed in vials in a 70% ethanol solution. IDFG typically traps adults and yearlings during April and May. Additional trapping sessions were added at the 2 study sites in June and July solely to obtain fecal samples during these months. Juveniles had emerged by this time and were included in the target group. Cow samples were collected during the July sampling period. Fecal pellets were submitted to the Washington State University's Department of Natural Resources, Wildlife Habitat Nutrition Laboratory for analysis.

RESULTS

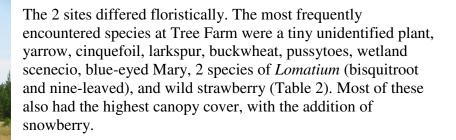
The first plant collection occurred on 21 and 23 May at Tree Farm. The species list for this site and Summit Gulch continued to be developed through 21 July. In all, 140 plants (including unknowns) were recorded for the 2 sites (Table 1). The collected specimens were examined by Payette National Forest botanist Alma Hanson, with assistance from Marilyn Olson, for species confirmation. The collection was then sent to Dr. Yensen and Pat Packard (retired botanist and herbarium curator), College of Idaho, to identify remaining unknowns and prepare voucher specimens.

Our identification skills were weak for grasses, sedges, and rushes. Several grasses were collected during the first visit at Tree Farm before they had flowered. Many of the early-flowering forbs were gone before we surveyed Summit Gulch, and we did not do as complete a walk-through compared with Tree Farm, so likely more species occur at Summit than the list reflects. In a following year, an earlier survey is needed at both sites, as well as more attention to shrubs and graminoids.

Only 1 Daubenmire vegetation sampling survey was completed at each site, and the respective dates fell mid-way between fecal pellet sampling. Four 100-m transects (40 frames) were completed at Tree Farm on 10 June; 5 transects (50 frames) were completed at Summit Gulch on 23/24 June.







The most frequently encountered species at Summit Gulch were *Collomia sp. & Microsteris sp.* combined, 3 grasses, buckwheat, yarrow, white wyethia, and blue-eyed Mary. Buckwheat had the highest cover, followed by 1 of the unidentified grasses, lupine (non-fuzzy), prairie smoke, and the combined *Collomia sp./Microsteris sp.* (Table 3).

We collected NIDGS fecal samples in May and July from Tree Farm, and June and July from Summit Gulch. We trapped at Summit Gulch in May, but it was prior to having protocols and materials to preserve pellets for this study. The target 15 samples per sampling period was unattainable at Summit Gulch, even after pups had emerged. Trapping at this site has been difficult for several years. Adults and pups are not as vocal as at other sites and trapping success is low. We submitted 55 fecal samples to the University of Washington for analysis (Table 4).

ASSESSMENT

This pilot effort provided an opportunity to test methods and identify potential problems with the study design. One of the biggest challenges is using Summit Gulch as a study site. Summit Gulch has a long history of NIDGS population monitoring, has an on-going mark-recapture study, and has livestock use that overlaps with the squirrels' active season. However, trapping individuals is difficult and the population appears to be in decline (Evans Mack and Bond 2008). The study design calls for 15 NIDGS fecal samples (i.e., 15 different individuals) in each of 5 months (March – July) each year. In 2008 only 9 individuals were trapped during 2 days in May. In general, the latter 2 sampling periods in June and July should be easier because pups have emerged, but that didn't prove to be the case at Summit in 2008. Lost Valley would make an interesting alternate site if diet alone is the focus. However, if the relationship between NIDGS and livestock is an objective, current livestock use is not coincident with the adult/yearling active season. A more experimental approach would be needed whereby livestock use is manipulated directly.

Extending trapping into July adds risk for adult squirrels. Adults are close to entering hibernation at this time and have put on substantial weight. Males especially are extremely vulnerable to heat stress. We had the first trap mortality in 6 seasons during this pilot study. Live-trapping protocols need to be tightened to account for warmer temperatures, and it may require more days per site if trapping hours are restricted to early morning and late afternoon/evening.

In addition to recording vegetation species at each study site, recording phenology and frequency at the time of fecal sampling puts NIDGS diet in the context of availability and preference. The Daubenmire vegetation sampling we used was a standard approach and relatively straightforward, although more frequent sampling will be required. Daubenmire plot frames were inexpensive and relatively quick. The downside was that the data collected were based on ocular estimates of canopy cover, which was subjective. In this pilot year the same person ran all transects at both sites, minimizing observer bias. Point frames yield similar data but are based on an actual count of 'hits' on the frame, which is less subjective and thus more repeatable. Dr. Yensen suggested replacing plot frames with point frames.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Table 1. Preliminary list of plant species recorded at the Tree Farm and Summit Gulch northern Idaho ground squirrel sites, May – July 2008.

	Tree Farm	Summit Gulch
FORBS		
Achillea lanulosa (yarrow)	X	Χ
Agastache urticiflora (nettleleaf horsemint)	Χ	
Agoseris sp. (false dandelion)	Χ	Χ
Allium acuminatum? (hooker's onion)	Χ	Χ
Allium sp	Χ	Χ
Allium tolmiei (Tolmei's onion)		Χ
Antennaria spp. (pussytoes)	Χ	Χ
Arabis sp. (rock cress)	Χ	Χ
Arnica cordifolia (heart-leaved arnica)	Χ	Χ
Arnica sororia (twin arnica)	Χ	Χ
Balsamorhiza sagittata (arrow-leaved balsamroot)	X	Χ
Besseya rubra	X	Χ
Brodiaea douglasii (hyacinth)	Χ	Χ
Calochortus nuttallii (sego lily)	Х	Χ
Camassia quamash (camas)	X	Χ
Camissonia subcaulis - Oenothera sp (evening primrose)	Х	Χ
Capsella bursa-pastoris (shepard's purse)	Х	
Castilleja flava (yellow paintbrush)	Х	
Cirsium arvensis (canada thistle)	Х	Χ
Claytonia lanceolata (spring beauty)	Х	Χ
Clematis hirsutissima (sugar bowl)	X	Χ
Collinsia parviflora (blue-eyed mary)	Х	Χ
Collomia linearis (narrow leaved collomia)	Х	Χ
Crepis sp. (hawksbeard)	X	X
Cusick's Pea vine (white pea)	Х	
Cynoglossum officinale (houndstongue)	Х	Χ
Cystopteris fragilis (brittle bladderfern)	X	
Delphinum bicolor (larkspur-small)	X	
Delphinum nuttallianum (larkspur-tall)	X	Χ
Descurainia richardsonii? (tansy-mustard)	X	
Dodecatheon jeffreyi (shooting star)	X	
Erigeron sp. (fleabane-purple)	X	Χ
Eriogonum heracleoides (umbrella buckwheat)	X	X
Eriogonum sp. (mat forming (cushion?) buckwheat)	X	,,
Erythronium grandiflorum (glacier lily)	X	Χ
ragaria virginiana (strawberry)	X	X
Frasera albicaulis (<i>gentian</i>)	X	X
Fritillary pudica (yellow bells)	X	^
Galium sp. (bedstraw)	X	Х
Geranium viscosissimum (sticky purple geranium)	X	X
Geranium? Delphinium?	X	X

Table 1, con't. Preliminary list of plant species recorded at the Tree Farm and Summit Gulch northern Idaho ground squirrel sites, May – July 2008.

	Tree Farm	Summit Gulch
Geum triflorum (prairie smoke)	Х	Х
Hackelia floribunda (many flowered stickseed)	Χ	Χ
Heracium albertinum (hawkweed)	Χ	Χ
Hesperochiron pumilus (dwarf hesperochiron)	Χ	Χ
Hydrophyllum capitatum (ballhead waterleaf)	Χ	Χ
Ipomopsis aggregata (scarlet gilia)	Χ	Χ
Lappula redowskii (Western Stickseed)	Χ	Χ
Lathyrus sp	Χ	Χ
Lepidium campestre (peppergrass)	Χ	
Lithophragma bulbifera (starflower)	Χ	Χ
Lithophragma parviflora (starflower)	Χ	Χ
Lithospermum ruberale (stoneseed)	Χ	
Lomatium grayi (desert parsley)	Χ	Χ
Lomatium nubicale (biscuitroot)	Χ	Χ
Lomatium triternatum (nine-leaved desert parsley)	X	Χ
Lupinus caudatus (lupine-purple blooms)	X	Χ
Lupinus sericeus (lupine-fuzzy)	Χ	Χ
Madia glomerata (mountain tarweed)	Χ	
Mertensia longiflora (bluebells)	X	Χ
Microsteris gracilis (pink twink)	X	Χ
Montia perfoliata (Miner's lettuce)	Χ	Χ
Nemophilia breviflora? (nemophilia)	Χ	Χ
Orthocarpus? Ipomosis?	Χ	
Paeonia brownii (peony)	Χ	Χ
Penstemon gairdneri (penstemon)	Χ	
Penstemon globosus or procerus (penstemon)	X	Χ
Phacelia hastata (white-leaved phacelia)	Χ	Χ
Polygonum sp. (knotweed)	Χ	Χ
Potentilla glandulosa (sticky cinquefoil)	Χ	Χ
Potentilla gracilis (slender cinquefoil)	Χ	Χ
Primula cusickiana (Cusicks primrose)	Χ	
Prunella vulgaris (self-heal)	Χ	
Ranunculus glaberimus (sagebrush buttercup)	Χ	
Ranunculus uncinatus (buttercup-tall)	Χ	
Rumex acetosella (sheep sorrel)		Χ
Sanguisorba annua (prairie burnet)	Χ	
Saxifrage integrefolia? (saxifrage)	Χ	Χ
Sedum stenopetalum (stonecrop)	Χ	Χ
Senecio integerrimus (groundsel)	Χ	Χ
Senecio sp (butterweed)	Χ	X
Sidalcea oregana (checker mallow)	Χ	Χ
Sisyrinchium inflatum (grass widow)	Χ	Χ

Table 1, con't. Preliminary list of plant species recorded at the Tree Farm and Summit Gulch northern Idaho ground squirrel sites, May – July 2008.

	Tree Farm	Summit Gulch
Taraxacum officinale (dandelion)	Х	Χ
Thalictrum occidentale (meadow rue)	Χ	
Tragopogon dubius (yellow salsify)	X	Χ
Trifolium sp.		X
Trifolium sp.		X
Trifolium sp.		X
Trillium petiolatum (purple trillium)	Χ	
Urtica dioica (stinging nettle)	Χ	
Veratrum californicum or viride (hellebore)	Χ	
Verbascum thapsus (mullein)	X	X
Vicia	X	X
Viola adunca (lavender violet w/spur)	X	X
Viola nuttalii (yellow violet)	X	X
Wyethia helianthoides (white wyethia)	X	X
Zygadenus venenosus (death camas)	Χ	Χ
UNKNOWN composite - big dandelion leaf	Х	
UNKNOWN composite thick leaf long narrow at end, base-wide		X
UNKNOWN forgetmenot/paintbrush type	X	
UNKNOWN lance leaf grows in bunches	X	
UNKNOWN lance leaved w/red tinge	X	
UNKNOWN low lance-leaved	X	
UNKNOWN raddish leather leaf purple stem	X	
UNKNOWN short lanceolate yellow green	X	
UNKNOWN yellow spores underneath leaf	Χ	Χ
SHRUBS		
Amelanchier alnifolia (serviceberry)	X	Χ
Atremesia spp. (sagebrush)	Χ	X
Rosa woodsii (wild rose)	X	X
Crataegus douglasii (black hawthorn)	X	X
Symphoricarpos albus (snowberry)	X	X
Ribes cereum (squaw currant)	Χ	
GRAMINOIDS		
sedge (big one)	X	
sedge (bright green)	X	
tall grass (gray)	X	
bunch grass (short)	Х	
tall grass (not gray)	Х	
grass open seed flwr head (poa)	Х	
"orchard" grass - thick leaved	X	

Table 1, con't. Preliminary list of plant species recorded at the Tree Farm and Summit Gulch northern Idaho ground squirrel sites, May – July 2008.

	Tree Farm	Summit Gulch
4 more grasses	Х	
bunchgrass	X	
grass	X	
rush	X	
#1 A spic? Squirrel tail?		Χ
#2 Poa 1		Χ
#3 Agrostis stolonifera?		Χ
#4 brome?		Χ
#5 long awned grass		Χ
#6 Idaho fescue - (but it is not)		Χ
#7 small gone to seed grass		Χ
#8 grass basal leaf close to stem		Χ
#9 tight head leaves turned out yellow green		Χ
# 10 cheat grass?		Χ
#11 bluish bunch grass long panicle few spikelets		Χ
#12 elk sedge/pine grass		Χ
#13 kentucky blue grass? 2 sided stem		Χ
right angle grass	X	
small grass big spikelet	X	

Table 2. Site-level summary across 4 Daubenmire vegetation transects (40 frames) at Tree Farm, 10 June 2008. Species are listed in order of frequency of encounter.

Species	Total Canopy ^a	Species Composition ^b	Frequency ^c
Itty bitty unknown	197.5	18	98
Yarrow	125	12	40
Cinquefoil (P. gracilis)	60	6	23
Larkspur	22.5	2	23
Buckwheat	130	12	20
Pussytoes	55	5	18
Wetland scenecio	87.5	8	15
Blue-eyed Mary	40	4	15
Lomatium (bisquitroot)	40	4	15
Strawberry	40	4	15
Nine-leaved lomatium	15	0	15
Saxifrage (alum root)	12.5	0	13
Geranium	35	3	10
Sedum (stonecrop)	10	0	10
Snowberry	55	5	8
Sagebrush	32.5	3	8
Sticky Cinquefoil	20	2	8
Dandelion	7.5	0	8
Onion (small)	7.5	0	8
Parsley sp.	7.5	0	8
Starflower	7.5	0	8
Yellow Violet	7.5	0	8
White wyethia	52.5	5	5
Groundsel	30	3	5
Sticky Current	30	3	5
Fleabane	5	0	5
Grass Widow	5	0	5
Hawkweed (Agoseris)	5	0	5
Bedstraw	2.5	0	3
Camas	2.5	0	3
Evening Primrose	2.5	0	3
Peavine	2.5	0	3
Primrose (purple)	2.5	0	3
Thistle	2.5	0	3
Wetland hawkweed	2.5	0	3

^a Total canopy = (sum of [# of quadrats in cover classes x midpoint of cover class for each of 6 cover classes])/total # quadrats sampled

b Species composition = percent canopy cover of species/ total canopy cover of all species

^c Frequency = # of quadrats in which species is observed/total # quadrats sampled

Table 3. Site-level summary across 5 Daubenmire vegetation transects (50 frames) at Summit Gulch, 23 and 24 June 2008. Species are listed in order of frequency of encounter.

Species	Total Canopy ^a	Species Composition ^b	Frequency ^c
Collomia & Microsteris	322.5	7	78
Unknown Grass	395	9	36
Buckwheat	647.5	15	34
Yarrow	297.5	7	34
Poa 1	230	5	32
White Wyethia	147.5	5	30
Blue-eyed Mary	92.5	2	26
A. stolonifera	197.5	5	24
Unknown Itty Bitties	87.5	2	22
Snowberry	170	4	20
Mini Jacob's Ladder	100	2	20
Lupine (non-fuzzy)	347.5	8	18
Heartleaf arnica	115	3	16
Knotweed	32.5	1	16
Yellow Violet	17.5	0	14
Prairie Smoke	345	8	12
Miner's Lettuce	27.5	1	12
Cinquefoil (P. Gracilis)	110	3	10
Peavine - long narrow leaf	25	1	10
Strawberry	37.5	1	10
Groundsel	35	1	8
Pussytoes	45	1	6
Dandelion	45	1	6
Tight head	42.5	1	6
Onion	7.5	0	6
Sego Lily	7.5	0	6
Geranium	100	2	4
Wild Peony	30	1	4
Fuzzy Lupine	52.5	1	4
Penstemon spp.	30	1	4
Alumroot	30	1	4
Lomatium - Bisquitroot	5	0	4
Goatsbeard	5	0	4
Wild Rose	17.5	0	4
Stonecrop	5	0	4
Lomatioum - 9 Leaf	5	0	4
Death camas	5	0	4
Ballhead waterleaf	17.5	0	4
Squirrel tail A. spic	37.5	1	2
Wetland senecio	15	0	2
Shooting star	15	0	2

Table 3, con't. Site-level summary across 5 Daubenmire vegetation transects (50 frames) at Summit Gulch, 23 and 24 June 2008.

Species	Total Canopy	Species Composition	Frequency
Yellow spore	2.5	0	2
Clover	15	0	2
Black hawthorn	15	0	2
Spring beauty	2.5	0	2
Bedstraw	2.5	0	2
Cerceum - thistle like	2.5	0	2

^a Total canopy = (sum of [# of quadrats in cover classes x midpoint of cover class for each of 6 cover classes])/total # quadrats sampled

Table 4. Number of fecal samples collected May-July 2008 for diet analysis from Tree Farm and Summit Gulch northern Idaho ground squirrel sites.

NIDGS	Cow
12	
3	
12	10
8	10
35	20
	12 3 12 8

b Species composition = percent canopy cover of species/ total canopy cover of all species

^c Frequency = # of quadrats in which species is observed/total # quadrats sampled